

EPA gives conditional approval to plan to develop the Pluto gas field

ROBERT TAYLOR

THE Environmental Protection Authority has given a tentative green light to Woodside Petroleum's plan to develop the Pluto gas field off the Burrup Peninsula.

Though the EPA said the company's proposal did not fully meet its requirements for the marine environment, an improvement to its proposed offset package should result in the project getting approval.

"Provided a substantive offset package is agreed to and stringent conditions recommended are fully implemented, the Pluto LNG development could proceed," EPA deputy chairwoman Dr Andrea Hinwood said.

The EPA found the Pluto proposal would result in 54 per cent of coral next to the proposed export facilities in Mermaid Harbour at the Burrup being destroyed when the maximum allowed was 10 per

cent. It also said that unacceptable damage would occur through dredging for new export facilities and the 190km pipeline within the proposed Dampier Archipelago Marine Park around Conzinc Island.

It recommended a "dredge impact management plan" to minimise damage in Mermaid Sound and prevent any impact in the proposed marine park.

Woodside hopes to have the \$6 to \$10 billion Pluto field in production by 2010 and plans to build a processing plant and harbour next to existing facilities at Karratha for the North-West Shelf project it runs with companies including Shell and Chevron.

The EPA found that the Burrup's rock art would be protected by the management plan already established.

A spokeswoman said the company was "generally satisfied" with the EPA bulletin.

"The issues that we may need to

clarify are fairly technical, there are no broad-scale issues," she said.

The company has the choice of appealing against the EPA findings through the independent appeals convener or negotiating with the Department of Environment and Conservation over the offset program before Environment Minister David Templeman makes a final recommendation on the project.

But Conservation Council spokesman Tim Nicol said yesterday that though the EPA had recognised the importance of the coral in the area it had paid lip-service to preserving it.

"What's really happened here is that they're trying to put the facility in the wrong place," Mr Nicol said. "We've got internationally significant rock art there, a significant marine environment and we're trying to put industry over the top of it."